Holy Waste
September 25, 2011

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Psalm 25:1–10
Philippians 2:5–11
John 12:1–8

"Why was this perfume not sold . . .
and the money given to the poor?"
John 12:5 (NRSV)

The history of humankind is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so. They wasted all out of the fullness of their hearts.

Paul Tillich
The New Being

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Open our minds and our hearts to your gracious, challenging word, that hearing we may believe, and believing trust you with our lives: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We have a lot of important business to attend to this morning. We are installing an Associate Pastor, the Reverend Judith Watt, to her new ministry and officially welcoming her to Fourth Presbyterian Church, always a great occasion in the life of a congregation. Present with us are members of the Commission appointed by the Presbytery of Chicago to install Judy, and there are friends and family here to celebrate the happy occasion with her, and I want to welcome each of them.

It is also the day we are launching the 2012 Annual Appeal to support the work and mission of this church in the year ahead. When I asked our fundraising staff if they had any points they particularly wanted me to make in this sermon, I received a terse reply: "This is your last shot. Try to get it right this time." There are pledge cards in the pew racks in front of you. You will also be receiving a pledge card and return envelope in the mail. And there are any number of web-based ways to pledge or give. Visit our website or look for links in our weekly enews and on Facebook. We're asking all our members and friends to make a financial commitment

between today and Reformation Sunday, October 30. You could, of course, listen to this sermon, become inspired, and make a generous pledge this morning, which would go a long way toward enhancing my reputation with our Development staff.

And then there is the matter of the Cubs. The title of this sermon, “Holy Waste,” has nothing to do with the Cubs. On the other hand, I have loved baseball since it entered my life when I was ten years old. Over the years I have listened on the radio, watched on television, visited and watched games in ten or so major league parks, played at it, read about it fairly extensively. It has been an altogether satisfying avocation, punctuated with occasional periods of frustration and sadness and great joy and happiness. Over the years I have given my heart to

The Pittsburgh Pirates, from the age of ten: my first true love;
Briefly the Cleveland Indians;
The Philadelphia Phillies in 1950, when they won the Major League pennant with a collection of young players known affectionately as the “Whiz Kids”;
The Cincinnati Reds, when we lived in Ohio;
The Chicago White Sox in 1959, when we first came to Chicago and the Sox won the pennant that very night; and
Since 1985, the Chicago Cubs. I have in the intervening years attended something like 300 games at Wrigley Field.

Every team on that list has won a World Series championship in my lifetime, except one. I confess that I really thought the Cubs would do it before I retired. After all, every other team to whom I gave my heart got around to it. I confess that I harbored that hope earlier this year. Maybe everything would come together, there would be no injuries, every player would have his best year ever, maybe a miracle would happen, and I would sit in my seat in October and watch a World Series in Wrigley Field. It didn’t happen. It hasn’t happened in 103 years. There have been sixteen U.S. Presidents since it happened last, eleven amendments to the Constitution, Haley’s comet passed twice, five states have been added to the Union, generations have been born and passed away like “a dream dies at the opening day” as the psalmist put it, and no world championship.

But last Tuesday evening the next best thing happened. The leaders of this church persuaded the Cubs to invite me to throw out the first ball before a game with the Milwaukee Brewers, and I did. It wasn’t a great pitch, but it got there eventually. About 500 Presbyterians crowded in the left field corner stands, and it was about as much fun as I have ever had, and I want to say thank you for that.

The Cubs didn't play very well, lost the game in fact, for the eighty-seventh time this year.

This is not about being reasonable. If it were about being rational and reasonable, everybody would be a New York Yankees fan. This is about something more primal and powerful than reason. This is about deep love of the heart, passion, extravagance, holy waste, if you will.

Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. There is a heaviness in the air as they walk along the road from the comfortable safety of Galilee to the capital city, where Jesus' most vociferous critics and opponents are. He has warned his disciples repeatedly that there will be trouble ahead, maybe even suffering and death. When they come to Bethany, a few miles outside Jerusalem, they stop at the home of Jesus' closest and dearest friends: two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. A dinner has been planned for him. Martha has prepared and served it. It was a pleasant occasion, a welcome respite from the sense of foreboding he and they must have been experiencing. As they are eating, reclining around a low table, talking, laughing, Mary does the most extraordinary thing: gets up, walks over to where Jesus is reclining, pours out a jar of very costly and very aromatic perfume over his feet, and then kneels down and wipes them with her hair. The perfume is usually kept to anoint a body for burial. It is also used for romance, eros. It is very expensive: a pound of nard is worth a year's wages for a working person. It is a real luxury. It is not, that is to say, ever poured out, all at once, over any person's feet.

It was a stunning moment. No one knows what to make of it, nor what to say. Judas breaks the silence: "What a waste! She could have sold that perfume for a lot of money and done some real good with it. It would have purchased a lot of food for poor hungry people."

"Leave her alone," Jesus says. In Matthew's and Mark's accounts he adds, "She has done a good thing. . . . What she has done will be remembered always" (Matthew 26:12–13.)

The great twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich wrote some of the most ambitious and difficult theology imaginable. He also preached some of the simplest and clearest sermons. A collection of those remarkable sermons, delivered in university chapels mostly, was published under the title *The New Being,* one of Tillich's favorite terms to describe Christian faith. A sermon on this incident is titled "Holy Waste." He said, "What has she done? She has given an example of waste, which as Jesus says, is a beautiful thing. It is, so to speak, a holy waste, a waste growing out of the abundance of the heart."

“Who can blame the disciples for being angry about the immense waste?” he asked. “Certainly not a deacon who has to take care of the poor, . . . a social worker, a church treasurer.”

And then this distinguished philosopher and consummate rationalist takes a surprising turn. There is a danger in religion of being so reasonable that we lose the beauty of “wasteful self-surrender,” he says. “We are in danger of a religious and a moral utilitarianism; without the abundance of the heart nothing great can happen. . . . Calculating love is not love at all.”

“Without the abundance of the heart nothing great can happen.”

As I was pondering all that, I happened on a television show we occasionally watch and love every time, on PBS: *Doc Martin.* It’s about a physician in a small village on the southwestern tip of England. He’s wonderfully eccentric, not very attractive, a kind and good man and physician, but incredibly awkward socially, consistently bumbling and fumbling personal relationships. In the episode we watched, he and the local school principal, Louisa, have shared a hazardous medical adventure involving a young boy. Doc Martin has essentially saved his life. He and Louisa are clearly attracted to each other. Both are single and lonely. In the back of a taxi on the way home from the hospital, their hands touch and Louisa literally throws herself at Doc Martin, kissing him passionately. As they break off the kiss, which he is apparently enjoying very much, and look lovingly and passionately into each other’s eyes, he says, “I’m assuming you have a regular dental hygiene routine.”

“Well, obviously not in the last few hours,” she says, “but thank you very much, yes, I have.”

He persists: “Well that would suggest rhinositis or gastroesophageal reflux.”

“Are you saying I have bad breath?”

“I just think it would be wise to rule out any infection of the aerodigestive tract. Obviously a dietary explanation would be the happiest outcome.”

The episode ends with the taxi stopping in the middle of the road, the door opening, and Doc Martin unceremoniously kicked out of the taxi, walking the rest of the way home alone.

The great theologian said, “Do not suppress in yourself the impulse to do what the woman at Bethany did. Do not suppress in yourselves the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender, the Spirit who trespasses all reason. Do not greedily preserve your time and your strength for what is

useful and reasonable. Keep yourself open for the creative moment which may appear in the midst of what seemed to be waste" ("Holy Waste," *The New Being*, pp. 48–49).

There is some of that in every vocational commitment, every response to a sense of call—an impulse to give your life to something that may not be lucrative or lead to power and influence or what our culture defines as success, the "waste" of all of that in order to serve, give, help, make a difference, create something of lasting value and beauty. There is something of that in the celebration today of Judy Watt's decision to be a Minister of Word and Sacrament.

And there is something of that as we think about giving our money. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, in a fine book*, The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age,* wrote, "Love, not utility, is the heart of stewardship. Without deep and profound love for the world for which God offered up his only begotten Son, no amount of beating the drum for God and for money will make the least difference" (p. 58).

Thinking about Mary pouring expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and drying them with her hair, this extravagant, passionate, wasteful act of love, I found myself thinking again about Dana Ferguson. Many of you remember that Dana, Associate Pastor for Mission, and Executive Associate Pastor, died three years ago next month. A year earlier, four years ago this month, she preached a sermon to kick off the stewardship campaign. She reported on the results of a "Giving Assessment" we conducted among the membership of this church: You said you didn't want to be asked for money so many times during the year, so we consolidated our asks. And you said you thought that when it came time for stewardship, the church, the ministers particularly, are too vague and euphemistic about money, particularly in sermons. "Tell us straight," you said. "Tell us what we need. Tell us what you want us to give."

So she did that, and we've been doing it ever since. It takes $10 million dollars annually to keep this light in the city burning: utilities and maintenance; musicians and choirs; materials for the nursery; Sunday School; ministers to visit the sick and stand with the grieving, to teach and preach and lead; tutoring for 400 children from low-income neighborhoods, a Social Service Center to receive and welcome and help the neediest of our neighbors; and participation in the life and mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in the Presbytery of Chicago and throughout the world. Ten million dollars. Forty percent of that will come from invested funds; twenty percent will come from fees and grants; and forty percent will come from pledges and gifts from our members—about $4 million.

We are doing better, but the majority of our members make no pledges or gifts: fifty-five percent. Forty-five percent carry the load. This year, as before, we need to continue to improve. Our per-capita giving is somewhere in the middle of the 100 churches in our presbytery.

Dana's sermon that day was titled "Priceless," and she told about moments in the life of our congregation that she loved and thought were priceless: the children of the Sunday School and teachers processing down the aisle and filling the chancel; a U2charist, a rock Communion service sponsored by the youth group. She told about Duke Foxx, homeless, a Social Service Center guest, who got his life together, stopped drinking, got a job, an apartment, joined the church, and then got cancer and died, and Fourth Presbyterian Church was his family to the end. And she told her favorite priceless incident, the call that came in over the emergency line to the minister on call—who happened to be Hardy Kim, when he was a Pastoral Resident—in the wee hours of a Saturday morning from the concierge at the Four Seasons Hotel. It seems that a Roman Catholic priest, the chaplain of the Holy Cross football team that was playing Notre Dame later that day, had forgotten his clerical collar. Did we happen to have a clerical collar he could use for his sideline detail later that day? Hardy leapt into action, drove down to the church, found a clerical collar, and delivered it to the concierge and a very grateful priest.

One of Dana's favorite topics was abundance and scarcity. Christians and Jews know about abundance: God's abundance, the abundance of God's creation, the abundance of God's promises, but we think and act and live scarcity.

Her favorite abundance–scarcity Bible story was the people of Israel in the wilderness worrying about scarcity—there was no food, no water in the wilderness—and God's goodness in providing manna, an abundance of manna. "You can't hoard God's abundance," Dana used to say. The Israelites tried it, and it doesn't work. Manna that is saved, spoils, becomes inedible. "That's the way it is with life," she said. "An abundance—but you can't hoard it, save it up for some other day."

"Stewardship is personal," Dana said. "It is not financial. It isn't about what the church needs or how much you should give to get the right tax break. It's about your relationship with God. It's about God's faithfulness and your trust in God to care for your life."

Dana even went so far as to suggest that we all might do without a luxury or two, because the church and what it does and means is so priceless.

Retirement and scarcity-thinking go together. As some of you know, when you begin to think about retirement, you begin to pay a lot of attention to

the financial pages, to the daily fluctuation of the Dow Jones average, to the value of 403bs and saving instruments, to the Federal Reserve and the Greek economy and the value of the dollar. It was a particularly frightening week for scarcity thinkers! Retirement and scarcity-thinking go together. So when it came time to make our pledge for 2012, our first retirement pledge, we made a pledge that reflected our new circumstances: an amount that was doable, comfortable, and certainly reasonable and sensible. And then I read Dana's "Priceless" sermon and gave it to Sue to read, and without much discussion, we tore up the pledge card and made a new one, to reflect our heart and love.

The heart of it all, this faith of ours, is love. God's extravagant love for the world, God's love revealed in the extravagant abundance of creation, God's love in Jesus Christ—a life unnecessarily, voluntarily cut short, many might say wasted, by his strong insistence on following his heart, going to the city, to be arrested and tried and crucified. What a waste that was. He could have counted up his years, heeded the sensible, rational advice of his friends, stayed in the safety of Galilee, lived a long and fulfilling life as a popular teacher. What a waste. What a Holy waste.

That's the heart of it—God's love in Jesus Christ—and our grateful love.

> God, whose giving knows no ending,
> From your rich and endless store:
> Nature's wonder, Jesus' wisdom,
> Costly cross, graves shattered door,
> Gifted by you, we turn to you,
> Offering up ourselves in praise;
> Thankful song shall rise forever,
> Gracious donor of our days.
> (From the hymn "God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending" by Robert L. Edwards)

Amen.